CHAPTER 5:

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

"A society beginning to move from one epoch to another requires the development of an especially flexible, critical spirit. Lacking such a spirit, men cannot perceive the marked contradictions that occur in society as emerging values in search of affirmation and fulfilment clash with earlier values seeking self-preservation".

PAULO FREIRE

INTRODUCTION

5.1   The lack of a culture of free flowing information in South Africa is hindered by a number of factors. The print media does not reach the majority of the population. Communications infrastructure and public infrastructure has ignored many millions of the urban poor and rural masses. Information is both a right and an essential ingredient in economic development. Without an extension of access to information, South Africa will be unable to generate sustained growth to meet the developmental needs of its population. The development challenges are, therefore, many and varied.

5.2   The government should be a centre of excellence. It should embrace access to information by developing an across-the-board policy - through education, research, development, personal needs, decision-making needs and mass communications.

5.3   The language used for communication must be appropriate and simple. Providers of information will be required to have communications skills that meet the needs of the people in both rural and urban settings. This will enable the government to provide the disempowered with access to information in whatever form is relevant.[25]

5.4   An efficient government information system should, in addition, make provision for a two-way system of communication. The development of the public service, and meeting the goals established for the reform of the public service to become open, transparent and accountable, is a general goal for all approaches to government information management. The people should be able to express their views to government and vice versa. This interactive means of information-sharing will enable the people to gain access to government information affecting all aspects of their daily lives.

5.5   The disadvantaged communities in rural and urban areas of the South African society should be the main targets for an enhanced development information system. Historically disadvantaged communities have been deprived of information related to their economies, education, cultures and societies. The beneficiaries of a developed information system, therefore, range from individuals to civil society.

5.6   The development challenges facing the GCIS in South Africa mean that a number of objectives need to be accomplished in a reasonably short period of time. Broad objectives could be listed as follows:

5.6.1   determination of the information needs of clients;

5.6.2 development of the necessary communication and public infrastructure to deliver the information;

5.6.3 dissemination of this information in an appropriate and timely format;

5.6.4 promotion of innovative and non-traditional means of disseminating information that incorporates learning, teaching, management and services in addition to conventional approaches to make information useful to clients;

5.6.5 raising the awareness of the availability of government information to all South Africans in compliance with relevant legislation.

5.7 IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION SYSTEM:

5.7.1 Implementation of the quickest, most cost-efficient means of disseminating development information in appropriate languages;

5.7.2 participation in innovative strategies of information-sharing for human development and playing a leading role in producing state-of-the-art development information;

5.7.3 establishment of directories of information resources available in government on all subjects, but with a special emphasis on development issues and nation-building;

5.7.4 utilisation of electronic devices wherever possible to enable people to make inquiries and retrieve information;

5.7.5 development of partnerships with designated Presidential Lead Projects to establish multi-purpose community centres (MPCCs) which disseminate useful information on government and other matters in a user-friendly manner to members of the community; and

5.7.6 acknowledgement that informal (indigenous) information plays a significant role in developing countries. A major development challenge is to harness this latent potential into a coherent contribution to the needs of the government communication service. Indigenous information is largely unstructured, very informal in extent and content, quite spontaneous and embedded in a cultural context.

The various components listed above illustrate the range of issues to be taken into account and are not supposed to be definitive.

5.8 NETWORKING

The overall system will need to take into account not only the government structures described above, but also the thousands of institutions involved: institutes attached to universities, the private sector, civil society, NGOs, CBOs, and international organisations.

Government communication needs to take into account the varied nature of development information. There is a need for a wide range of information services. The system can only meet needs through partnerships with others in the information industries to provide adequate supply and training to the population. Providers of information cannot cope with the often bewildering complexity of their environment.

Opportunities offered by new information technology must be identified and utilised. Caution must be exercised to avoid inappropriate technology and misleading technological solutions. An understanding of the problem, the possible solutions and the available technology is crucial.

Networking is an essential element of empowerment. This implies a building of information communication links to serve as early warning and support systems in librarianship and information work with the related professions. It is necessary to link individuals and professionals, users and other stakeholders notwithstanding professional and institutional differences.

Greater political awareness is also essential. Prevailing political, administrative and legal initiatives and the multiplicity of forums, policy documents, green or white papers and 'processes' in which the changing social context of libraries and information are addressed need to be monitored. The information and referral services should be capable of keeping all their clients informed through documents pertaining to these developments. Useful information on all social, political or economic activities should also be provided by information systems.

5.9 LINKAGES

5.9.1 Libraries[26]

The public library system could be a focal point in information dissemination to the community. This system can provide facilities for the dissemination efforts of various ministries and agencies to inform and educate the general public as part of individual growth and development.

Modern public libraries could quite easily install community resource databases as the foundation of community information services, which help people to deal with government. In the USA, for example, many libraries assist their users in completing their income tax forms. Community resource databases, in addition to external and documented information sources, list information resources and expertise found in the community itself as an important factor in the empowerment of the community.

The library could provide access to databases giving access to government and private tenders and related documentation and can further assist members of the community who wish to tender for contracts.

Libraries of all types should be promoted as agencies of the government information and communication system and for the affirmation of South Africa's cultural diversity. By collecting and exhibiting or promoting materials in our various indigenous languages and reflecting our diverse cultures, libraries can contribute to increasing mutual understanding and tolerance.

Libraries in South Africa must be the subject of a 're-think'. There is a need, however, to extend the public library network into historically black areas. Underutilised public buildings could be used for this. Realignment and reconceptualisation of libraries should result in all the people of South Africa receiving this service. This implies adaptation in the selection and organisation of materials, opening hours and services, siting and accommodation of libraries. Libraries need to be realigned in relation to other organs of society such as community centres, schools and trade unions. The philosophical assumptions of school and community library work need to be reconsidered and many librarians need to be re-educated.

Opportunities are presented in the form of the recent development of resource centres, which can co-operate with each other.

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26   Submssions were received from a number of libraries and other interested parties.

5.9.2 Multi-Purpose Community Centres[27]

The Multi-Purpose Community Centre (MPCC) concept is known by various other names such as Multi-Purpose Information Centres (MPIC), Telekiosks, Multi-Purpose Telecentres (MPTC) and so on. The nomenclature used to describe the concept differs according to the perspective of the persons involved. The envisaged centres are designated for a multitude of different purposes relating to the community they are supposed to serve.

Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs) or Multi-Purpose Information Centres (MPICs) can be used as focal points for empowering historically disadvantaged communities in collecting, analysing and sharing information related to their developmental needs.

An MPCC/MPIC should be an open structure that invites existing institutions, organisations and agencies to network or form a clearinghouse for development information. The MPIC should be capable of providing developmental information, not as an end product, but as a means for growth and development. All members of the MPCC should be concerned with providing useful and accurate information to communities in an appropriate way. The most important aspects of MPCCs are that they should be user-oriented, adaptable to local conditions and designed to be accessible to the communities they serve. The dispersal of MPCCs in communities is crucial to their success.

There are a number of burning questions to answer before any MPCC moves from concept to reality. The caution here is that these answers should, by and large, be supplied by the 'clients', i.e. the community. In view of the wide diversity of organisations and viewpoints involved, meaningful co-ordination of the creation and establishment of MPCCs is most important.

In spite of all MPCCs having generic features, problems and solutions, each MPCC is unique to a specific community and as individual as a thumbprint.

5.9.3 Theatre

The use of street theatre and drama by existing local dramatists, buskers and other performers using mime and the local vernacular could be an effective communication tool in rural areas. Training of troupes in government communications could be implemented through workshops. This non-traditional form of communication could benefit the outreach programmes of government communications for those without access to electronic forms of media or information about their lives. This could harness indigenous talent and uses oral communication which is culturally acceptable.

5.9.4 Telecommunications: Expanding Capacity

There is universal recognition that an efficient and accessible telecommunications infrastructure is an essential prerequisite for government to accelerate social development and economic growth. Such an infrastructure permits the exchange and dissemination of vital information among citizens' educational, cultural, health, welfare and other institutions. Therefore, it is of critical importance that telecommunications infrastructure be pervasive.[28]

5.9.4.1 It is also widely recognised that the Internet provides the capability to access national, international, local and regional information on countless subjects. In most cases, Internet access is readily available to universities, research institutions, business and private citizens in developed countries as well as in most urbanised areas of developing countries. There is, however, still a price attached to Internet access.

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27 See Recommendation 65.
28 See Annexure 16.

5.9.4.2 A viable route would be to couple a pervasive broadband information/ telecommunications infrastructure with country-wide Internet access. This would facilitate inter alia:

- Information Centres, One-Stop Information Shops or Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs) that can conceivably be deployed in rural and peri-urban areas, thus empowering remote communities to be part of the evolving global information society;

- universities, schools and communities to collaborate on a national, regional and international basis for the creation of appropriate local content. In this respect a model similar to the West African Griot concept where the traditional communities create 'multi-media' content is possible;

- the digitisation of museum pieces and other art treasures to make them available for viewing on Internet throughout the country;

- joint research by African scholars in the fields of development, history, culture and all research relevant to the continent;

- broad accessibility to a government on-line service.

5.9.4.3 The above applications and many others require a universal broadband telematic networking infrastructure. Telkom, while aware of this need, is focusing on the provision of basic telephones through its Vision 2000 project. The suggestion is, therefore, to supplement Telkom's activities in broadband infrastructure and Internet provision by approaching other service providers.

5.9.4.4 One means of extending this infrastructure is through the concept of the Community Information Delivery System (CIDS). This is a locally-developed and engineered technology focusing on networking infrastructure for delivery of content to remote sites by means of a low-cost, high bandwidth wireless network, which is rapidly deployable. It provides links between an information source and areas without fixed infrastructure. This technology is currently installed at several sites in the Pretoria area (Garsfontein, Lynwood, several schools and a community centre in Mamelodi and at a rural education centre east of Pretoria Ubuntu Centre).

5.9.5 The costs of developing this infrastructure runs into billions of rands. It is not within the scope of the Task Group's enquiry to cost such efforts. However, the need for an integrated programme co-ordinated within government to expand infrastructure is evident. Without this, whatever content or packages for information are developed, will continue to be accessible to a minority only.

5.9.6 The regulatory framework is critical.[29] Government lacks the skills, the technology and the finance to put this infrastructure in place. The private sector, in particular international finance and expertise, will be essential if the majority of South Africans are to become part of an information society.

5.10 CAPACITY BUILDING

The task of development cannot really be addressed until indigenous capabilities are established to access, acquire and utilise development information that has bearing on local information problems. A major trend in information resource management (IRM) is to facilitate access to stores of information otherwise unavailable. Government capacity-building initiatives should be developed and exploited to the fullest wherever possible in order to make the most efficient use of the limited resources available in South Africa.

Training and capacity-building will provide insight into information systems. Such initiatives will afford the participants the opportunity to formalise plans for the

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29   See Recommendations, Cabinet Committee on Information Technology.

development of information-sharing networks between government and the existing information resources. Training will also investigate the properties and factors governing information flow as well as methods of processing information for optimum accessibility and utility.

5.11 TRAINING

The development of improved capacity and effective affirmative action across the board in the communication profession requires that new partnerships be established between the various role players. There is great potential for the government to initiate this process and involve the relevant schools of communication in the universities and technikons, specialised bodies such as the IBA, the SABC and the private sector. Both the PRISA and AAA, and a number of newspapers already funding training have indicated their willingness to join a collaborative effort with government.[30] In this way, government resources could be matched with the private sector. Programmes could be developed which assist the government and non-governmental sectors. If this is to happen, the funding stakeholders should be involved in the development and governance of such schemes. Special joint-funding arrangements should be established.

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30   See especially AAA proposal, Annexure 13. See also Recommendation 58.